

UNDER THE SIGN OF CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

The series of enunciations exposed in this work attempts to establish a conceptualization of consumption in relation to the communication and reception processes of symbolic goods. In addition, it will attempt to account for some possible derivations of the problem in question. The article explores different definitions penned by diverse authors seeking to set out the essential aspects concerning the object of study. Thus, consumption becomes a space within which the appropriation of material and symbolic goods, social differentiation and symbolic class distinctions, integration, communication, amongst other things, take place. Despite the fact that none can sufficiently explain all the peculiarities related to consumption practices, all offer enriching insights that help us understand the concept we are dealing with. This is why the purpose of the present formulation is to reflect from another perspective, stressing the particularisms. And, in this way, to begin to lift the veil that conceals the forces of the social matrix. .

Keywords: Consumption – Symbolic goods - Communication - Receptors – Social Actors - Identity - Particularisms.

Introduction

The purpose of the present article is to think about consumption or, more precisely, to analyze some of the writings that account for such a complex process. To carry out this task, we shall explore said concept taking as a starting point the studies made by some leading authors in the investigation of the subject.

Our analysis shall begin by the presentation of a brief description of the period with reference to the state of the communication field and the Latin-American political context within the framework of the third stage of Cultural Studies. We shall also review, albeit succinctly in a few references, the methodological tools of the period.

Secondly, we shall make reference to the different rationalizations elaborated by the anthropologist Néstor García Canclini in his work *Consumers and Citizens*.

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Additionally, starting with the studies made by a number of intellectuals that have approached the subject with their own distinctive hues, we shall examine the possible derivations resulting from the theses posited in their writings, a central approach to the 90s.

Thirdly we shall focus on a particular conceptualization of consumer behaviour: the formation of an identity related to a globalising matrix. From this view, we shall express our dissidence regarding some aspects, to finally propose the consideration of another aspect from which to delve into the issue we are addressing.

Before we initiate the penning of some brief reflections, we think it is appropriate to explain that we shall not attempt to carry out a complete description of the communication field stage, nor of the political context of the period.

Despite recognizing its marked influence on our object of study, its treatment exceeds the objectives of this study.

1. Brief description of the period

The act of pulling the string of consumption leads us to the theoretical traditions that are at work along the last stage of the Cultural Studies. This period acts, both theoretically and methodologically, on the reflections made by a group of intellectuals interested in the subject. For this reason, we shall make reference to some scholars that, in a way, hold an hegemonic role in the fields of communication and culture in Latin America. As an example, Jesús Martín Barbero who makes his contributions concerning the subjects of “mediations” and “popular pleasures”; y Néstor García Canclini who focuses on “cultural hybridization”, and “consumer communities”.

After carrying out an ideological analysis, the property system of the media, its structure, etc., in a third stage, the so-called Birmingham School, lays emphasis on how the drift towards the study of audiences grows. In the construal of the meaning of messages, Mattelart y Mattelart (2005) point out that the receptor is recognized to have an active role and underline the importance of the context of this reception. The consumer becomes then an object and a subject of research, as shown by the rise in the number of measuring techniques of objectives and “life styles”, which grow more and more refined thanks to computer technologies for the production and storage of data concerning both the individual and groups (p.108). In other words, the stress is on the so-called “ethnography of audiences”. The aim is to study these receptors by means of a qualitative approach, within their situations, by applying a series of techniques with open or half open surveys, interviews in depth, participant observation, among other resources.

Theorists come to the conclusion that it was necessary to acquire this knowledge, not in the manner of the theory of Uses and Gratifications, but drawing from certain cultural presuppositions, such as experience, daily life, social institutions, symbolic power, age, gender, etc.

All these presuppositions imply a series of tools needed to condition but also to understand the consumption of media. That is to say, the individual is no longer a rating number, in the sale of a best-seller, but a young man or an adult, a man or a woman, from middle class or the working class, from a typical family or from broken homes, with one or several TV sets, amongst other questions to be considered. This kind of analysis reformulates, in a way, the so-called hard data.

As regards the state of the field, the autonomization of the sixties and seventies has been left behind, as well as the institutionalization stage. We are now witnessing the time of professionalization. In terms of communication, this period makes its meaningful contribution while the leading scholars become more specialized in the field. But, according to Gándara (2006), the market also places itself as the main claimant of research and certain consumables, a situation that in the past, unlike what happened in the nineties, did not exert any influence on certain intellectuals such as Schmucler o Steimberg. Thus, the author points out that the aforementioned cycle conditions the researchers' classical positions, both intellectually and politically.

The political context is not alien to said field, but in addition it generates its own effects on it. In the context of the period growing privatization processes arise, as well as increasing economic concentration, working-class pauperization, educational crises, weakening of the unions, amongst other economic transformations. That is to say, the deep changes that took place in Latin America left their mark on the minds of the theoreticians working in the area.

Having made this contextualization, in the following section we shall examine a series of aspects that contribute to a conceptualization of consumption related to the processes of communication and reception of symbolic goods. We shall do this based mainly on García Canclini's view, and also on the writings of other well-known scholars, to finally account for a few possible implications of the problem in question.

2. The faces of rationality

To think about some of the central issues dealt with in the work known as *Consumers and Citizens* implies entering the field of communication and culture while García Canclini (1995), the author of these lines, is one of the researchers that has worked most extensively on the subject of consumption, trying to go beyond the

classical approach. Thus, and in general terms, he holds that consumption is a space in which the uneven appropriation of material and symbolic goods, as well as social differentiation, and symbolic class distinctions, integration, communication take place and, lastly, a place for the objectification of desires. With regard to the text, Sunkel (2002) indicates that even if each of these views is necessary to explain certain aspects of consumption, none is, by itself, sufficient.

With the aim of elaborating a sociocultural theory on the subject, García Canclini (1995) poses a series of models that conceptualize the notion of consumption and, at the same time, he states that this is not an irrational action. In the chapter entitled "Consumption helps thinking", an extended and edited version of the article that, with the same title, he published on the magazine "Dialogues of Communication" in 1991, the author states that: "[...] to consume usually means to incur in wasteful expenditure and irrational compulsion. This moral and intellectual disqualification is based on other commonplace expressions about the omnipotence of the mass media that would incite the masses to become unthinkingly greedy for goods" (p.41)

García Canclini (1995) holds that, in principle, the market value cannot be defined as "something contained 'naturally' in the objects, but that it is the result of sociocultural interactions in which men use them" (p. 53). For Sunkel (2002), this definition implies recognizing that necessities are social constructions and that even the threshold of the most basic biological necessities in the pyramid is satisfied in a variety of ways according to culture and historical periods. But, in addition, the rejection of the behavioural vision, also leaves aside an "instrumentalist conception" of goods, i.e.: that which holds that goods only have the value of use to satisfy concrete needs.

Some studies coming from diverse lines of research, consider consumption as the place where the process that began with the production of goods is completed, the sphere of reproduction of labour forces and capital growth. From this standpoint, individual needs or preferences are not responsible for determining consumption; instead, planning the distribution of goods depends on the large structures of capital administration. The economic system is in charge of deciding how to reproduce the work capacity and increase producers' profits. In fact, the Marxist perspective holds that consumption exists in order to allow capital growth as well as the renewal of the labour force. Therefore, the offer of goods and publicity induction of their purchase are not arbitrary.

Now then, García Canclini (1995) states that the sole rationality is not of the macro social kind chosen by the big economic agents. The author considers that Marxist studies of consumption and those of the first stage of mass communication

(from 1950 until 1970) oversized the power of companies to determine users and audiences. The consumption process sticks out as something more complex than the relationship that is established between manipulating media and docile audiences (p. 41). Furthermore, he insists that a good number of research works on mass communication has shown that bonds between those who emit the messages and those who receive them are not limited to dominance relationships. Thus the cultural hegemony does not translate into unilateral actions that imprison a target group in so far as they recognize themselves as mediation agents (family, neighbourhood and work group) at work between both of them.

A more complex theoretical approach which originated in the fields of anthropology and sociology, and linked to the relationship between producers and consumers, emitters and receptors, posits that consumption also evidences an “interactive sociopolitical rationality” (García Canclini, 1995, p. 43). That is to say: economic growth, the rise of some groups and the enrichment of expectations caused, in part, by the expansion of education, intervenes in the consumer moves and their demands regarding a proliferation of objects and brands, communication networks and access to consumption.

In García Canclini’s words (1995): “To consume is to participate on a stage where people fight for the goods their society produces and for the way they are used” (p. 44). Promptly, he concludes that if consumption “was once a territory of more or less unilateral decisions, today it is a space for interaction, where producers and emitters must not only seduce the target group but also justify themselves rationally (Ibid.). And, on the other hand, he also highlights the political importance of consumption. By way of example, the latter is perceived – according to the author – when the discursive echoes from the politicians who stopped hyperinflation in Argentina, México y Brasil and focused their electoral strategy on the threat that a change in the economic orientation would affect those who incurred in debt by purchasing goods in instalments. More concretely, the fact makes reference to the so-called “instalment vote”. Here the implication is: an unfavourable election result for the government would mean a grave damage for those voters that owe money as a consequence of their consumption. There is here a marked link that is established by the aforesaid anthropologist between consumption and the condition of citizen (p. 44).

Inspired by Bourdieu’s work, García Canclini (1995) formulates yet another model that pays heed to the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of the consumer rationality. Thus, he conceives consumption as a “space of symbolic differentiation of classes” and as “a place for desire objectification”. The French sociologist explains that, in modern societies, most of the rationality implicit in social relationships is built in the fight for the ownership of the means of symbolic distinction, rather than those

of production. As people do not consume in greater measure what they need or desire but, on the contrary, what they like. And this liking that translates into an act of choosing which does not belong in the natural order or to what is given. It is a means of symbolic distinction structured on the basis of the social conditions of existence. In short, for Bourdieu (2003), cultural needs are the product of education. Thus he posits this view in a text entitled *Cultural Consumption*, when he states that the spread of cultural practices – frequent visits to museums, going to concerts, exhibitions, reading, etc – and the corresponding preferences as regards painters, musicians or writers are intimately related to the level of instruction, determined as a function of degree achieved and the number of years of study, as well as social origin..

According to García Canclini (1995), in places where the members of a given class or even a class fraction, eat, study, inhabit, in the way of getting information, and transmitting this information, etc., in all this, there is a sociological vision that reveals a common logic to these scenarios. Then, in so far as consumption serves to divide, in so far as the social actors in a society share the meanings of goods, as they are not only understandable to an elite or minority, they act as differentiation tools. In this way – the author points out – an indigenous festivity whose mythical sense is the product of those who belonged to the ethnic group is transformed into an element of differentiation or discrimination while other social groups apprehend to some degree its meaning. Then, he concludes that “a society’s integrating communicational rationality” is partly formed through consumption (p.45); i.e., by the clothes we wear, the places we frequent, the way we speak, and the kind of language we build. In other words: the ways and manners with which we reproduce the logic that governs our relationships and make us members of a particular society.

With regard to the consumption of works of art in terms of reading, Bourdieu (2003) considers that it constitutes a “communication process”, an act of deciphering or decoding that entails the grasp of a cipher or code. This is why the capacity of construing a piece of writing, matches the measure of knowledge or, in any case, of the words or concepts we have to name things and that operate as perception, for those who have been taught the code in which the work of art has been written. To the spectator who does not know the specific code, the work exposed to his ears, contemplation or reading becomes a mass of chaotic sounds and rhythms, of lines and colours, without rhyme or reason. The author understands that the encounter with the work of art entails an act of knowledge, a decoding operation, that implies setting into action a cognitive patrimony, of a cultural code. This code or patrimony works like a “cultural capital” that, because it is unevenly distributed, awards “distinction” benefits.

To Bourdieu (1991), preferences are born from a confluence of offer and demand, between objects already classified and classification systems. That is, they are the product of a confluence between an expectation and a realization, between a history in an incorporated state and a history in an objectified state. Thus preferences manifest themselves not only in practice but also in goods. And in goods one can appreciate the producer's preferences. In this way, the producer's preferences are objectified in the goods he makes. It is a confluence between the consumer's incorporated preference and the objectified preference of the producer.

Let us now explain what rationalizing consumption means in terms of a ritual. According to García Canclini (1995), we might regard consumption as a ritualistic process whose primary function consists in making sense of the rudimentary heavy seas of events. What has been said implies assigning a certain rationality that establishes an order and gives security, and, by the same token, creates the structures whereby the things we wish are thought of and ordered (pp. 46-47). In this regard, the author indicates that societies do not tolerate too much the erratic penetration of desires, or the consequent uncertainty of meanings. What it boils down to, in the end, is to make to make more intelligible a world where solid matter seems to evaporate (p. 48). In order to explain how the frequency of certain sumptuary expenditures, wasteful for the popular classes, seems to be associated with rituals and celebrations by which society tries to organize rationally, the researcher resorts to some anthropological studies. Thus, in agreement with Douglas & Isherwood's view, Sunkel (2002), manifests that García Caclini (1995) defines consumption as: "the set of sociocultural processes by means of which the appropriation and use of products takes place" (pp. 42-43).

Even if some anxious and obsessive consumer behaviours may express a deep dissatisfaction, consumption is linked with the dissatisfaction created by the erratic flow of meanings. Consequently, the action of purchasing objects, hanging them on or putting them around the house, assigning them a given place within an order, etc., are but means – García Canclini states (1995) – to think of ourselves from within our own body, the unstable social order and uncertain relationships with other actors. Therefore, merchandise not only helps to develop the market and to reproduce the labour force, to differentiate ourselves from others and establish communication with them but, in Douglas & Isherwood's words, the Argentinian anthropologist states that "merchandise serves to enable thinking" (García Canclini, 1995, p.48).

The previous text reveals the fact that the act of consuming constitutes a ritualistic process where social and personal identities are formed. We are looking at a rite that fortifies and sets in order the erratic meanings as a direct consequence of the state of crisis that has affected the great narratives. In this way, consumption becomes

a ritualistic-cultural practice that allows us to think about the surrounding world and at the same time to think about our own selves within it. In this definition, anchored in differentiation though not on inequality, is the one chosen by García Canclini (1995) as closing lines for his work..

However, this definition – Gándara reflects (2006) – represents a contradiction within García Canclini's imaginary (1995). Indeed, the author himself points out that supposedly, merchandise serves to think about a milieu of a given period where democracy strengthened with the market. Notwithstanding, he concludes that consumption might help to think, but that the act cannot be realized while the market continues to be a mere scenario for merchandise exchange. And, thus, it does not turn out to be really an invitation to think. There must be circulation of reliable informational material and in all directions in relation to merchandise, with the possibility of controlling consumers and of refuting the lies embedded in propaganda.

The participation of civil society in those scenarios where food is sanitarily enabled or where the concession of a new bandwidth is decided, to give an example, demonstrate – García Caclini states (1995) – the degree of citizen participation related to consumption. Therefore, there must be a clear articulation between consumption and the practice of citizenship. The offer of merchandise must be vast and diverse, and messages, easily understood and must have a fair circulation between majorities (pp. 51-54).

Now then, in order that the consumer be able to think within the market framework, to develop to the best of his possibilities, to form an identity, we should imagine – paraphrasing Schmucler (1997)– a market without a logic of maximum profits, of false innovation, etc. By way of conclusion, the author holds that the market, consumption, represent but a very poor answer to think about the meaning we give to our own lives.

The thesis that merchandise (consumption) enables thought, on the other hand, openly opposes the School of Frankfurt. Let us be precise: Horkheimer & Adorno (1947) two of its most outstanding exponents, posit that consumption is not useful to induce thinking at all in so far as merchandise produced by the cultural industry leads us into insanity. In this way, Adorno holds that man becomes a kind of pseudo-individual in so far as he consumes within the context of an offer that he himself has previously chosen and, at the same time, reproduces the system's structures of domination. On the other hand, merchandise cannot make the world "intelligible", as, in Marxist terms, they do not open our thinking but, on the contrary, they close it. All this happens while the "fetishization" process determines that merchandise should become an object that hides human work.

The approach to the concept of consumption by Martín Barbero is made, on the other hand, from the standpoint of a criticism to “media-centrism” and a non-reproductive perspective through his elaboration of a “mediation” category. In a work entitled *From the media to mediations*, the author manifests that mediation constitutes a place for the symbolic appropriation of cultural goods. The act of mediating is then the attribution of sense that the receptor gives to the message based on his experience. Thus, he considers that practices in the daily life of the popular classes do not constitute a mere reproduction of the labour force, but rather they are activities that give meaning to their lives. That is, consumption must be understood as “production of sense” (Martín Barbero, 2003; Sunkel, 2002).

Upon reaching this point, it becomes opportune, to make a stop at the word mediation. The term attempts to explain, in principle, the ways of consumption and to attenuate the responsibility of production. The consumer constructs his consumption amid a series of mediations (gender, age, social group, video – technological experience, habits, etc.). According to Martín Barbero (2003) – in agreement with García Canclini– the concept of mediation tries to differentiate the media itself from mediations. A person consumes media products and interposes certain mediations that manifest themselves as follows: who he consumes with, where, in what situation, etc. Even when this same individual develops a high-profile life, the bond between the subject and the media becomes another mediation.

Having made this clarification, consumption must be understood, according to Martín Barbero (2003), as the set of daily practices linked to the relationship with one’s own body, the employment of time, the way of inhabiting space, the sense of the achievable and the unachievable, but also as the overcoming of these limits not only through simple wishful expressions, but through the subversion of the codes that attribute sense (p. 295).

Sunkel (2002) points out that the aforementioned author also stresses that communication processes participate in the formation of identities and communities. Thus the media, to give an example, are not limited to being “a commercial phenomenon, or a means for ideological manipulation”. It constitutes a “cultural phenomenon” by means of which social actors construct their meaning of life. On the other hand, for Martín Barbero, consumption appears as an essential axis of study within a reality that faces the global reach of markets with fragmentary modalities of consumption. The challenge lies in understanding the new ways of social grouping, the changes that have taken place in the way people get together as shown by social actors.

The other aspect stressed by Martín Barbero and that Sunkel (2002) makes his own as he considers it a central contribution for consumption research, is related to

the place from which the communication process is formulated. Thus, the Hispanic-Colombian researcher asks himself how much exchange and interaction there is within the framework of communication between subjects socially formed and placed in conditions that are asymmetrical, produced and of production, and therefore: power space, object of confrontations, changes and fights for hegemony: scenarios where the different ways of re-signifying-resisting– the dominant power system.

However, this recognition of daily practices as spaces that make possible a minimum level of freedom demands some clarification. On the one hand, they take place within the framework of a hegemonic system, and, on the other hand, they do not imply the overestimation of the consumer's freedom. Indeed, the aforementioned researcher warns that the consumer is not fully free to re-signify and renegotiate – though at some point he is going to suggest this – but that he does some cheating and mocks the established order. We must stress that this conception implies the idea of tension or conflict between the subject that takes something in the act of consuming and the cultural industry that sells merchandise to him. As an example, when it is said that a TV viewer, by a simple phone call, can participate in the sense-producing plot to modify the development of a character involved in the plot, in fact, he can only do it in the terms defined by the media structure.

Concerning the possible cheatings by consumers, Mattelart y Neveu (2004) point out that, in *L'Invention du quotidien, Arts de faire*, Michel de Certeau reflects on the resistance of receptors to the inflows of the hegemonic power. In addition, he manifests how, through different actions, consumers make “something else” with power structures. Through different social practices, the popular classes put into practice the art of combining by the use of objects according to a popular rationality (pp. 100-101). We are facing the so-called “cultural theft”: the weak party's tactic over the powerful man's strategy. But, notwithstanding, Mattelart and Mattelart (2005) forewarn us that in an article published by *Le Monde* newspaper, almost at the end of the 70s, De Certeau manifested that in the framework of a rationalized production, as expansionist as centralized and spectacular to which corresponds another production called consumption, it does not stand out with its own products, but by the way products imposed by the dominant economic order are employed (pp. 108-109).

3. On the other side of consumption

The purpose of this section is to examine some questions that appear behind the conceptual theses proposed mainly by García Canclini (1995) in *Consumers and Citizens*, a work that we have partially analyzed up to here, and which constitutes one of the most representative writings from the 90s. In the first place, and from the very title of his work, Gándara (2006) points out that both the term “consumers” as well as

“citizens” demarcate in different ways the implicit social actors. To conceptualize them, he does not resort to the notion of class, social groups or popular culture, but to two institutions that interpellate us all the time in our world of daily life: the market and the State. In being permanently interpellated by the market in our condition of consumers, this same terminology puts us on the same level in the act of consuming – the author forewarns us – beyond the differences we might recognize and, especially, great social inequalities. Then, the central premise is: “We are all consumers, we are all citizens”. On the other hand, in giving a title to his work, García Canclini joins by means of the conjunction “and” consumers and citizens. According to Gándara, this title – or proposition that summarizes the content of its almost two hundred pages – shows that the act of consuming holds an intimate relationship with the act of becoming a citizen. From this standpoint, which was dominant in the 90s, citizenship is constructed in the market space and through consumption of its products. In this sense, García Canclini (1995) states that: “In the past the State showed a demarcation (even if it was unjust and biased) to this variety of participation in public life, in fact, the market establishes a convergent regime for these participation forms through the order of consumption” (p. 21).

Thus, the nineties summarize what became to be called the public space crisis. Within this context, García Canclini (1995) points out that the market would turn out to be the institution that would emerge renewed and innovative to form our identity and, in particular, to form ourselves as citizens. Therefore, according to the author, recognizing that as citizens we are also consumers leads to the following reasoning: “to find in the diversification of preferences one of the aesthetic bases that justify the democratic conception of citizenship” (García Canclini, 1995, p. 30).

Through its pages, the researcher develops further his thesis: the market forms citizenship or, in other words, the citizen forms himself in the market. And this is not just a redundant expression in so far as both premises constitute by themselves two defensive ideas, that result from the place the market held in the nineties by the growing commercialization of cultural, educational and political spaces, among other factors. The markets turn into a model to be followed for all social institutions, both public under State control and public not under State control. In relation to this, Gándara (2006), among other authors, points out that schools and the political parties have been the institutions that historically have helped to form citizens, from learning of basic notions of civics, to social integration by virtue of being part of a political organization and participate as citizens in the election of their representatives, and even the use of the common language in both. All these factors are an essential part in the process of forming citizenship.

Looking towards delimiting further this concept, Mattelart y Neveu (2004) point out that the fascination in cultural studies for the figure of the consumer has relegated that of the citizen to a second place, having had to pay a high price for this: the loss of critical distance. As we have seen through a previous example, this drift can also be seen in the idea that a TV viewer that has become ‘autonomous’ by virtue of his intangible power to determine the production of sense in relationship with the shows he consumes. In this way, the authors state that:

The marginalization of the citizen by the consumer has been driven at the expense of questioning about the production actors, the market, the State and the decomposition/recomposition of the Nation State, but also on the new statute of consumption [...] (Mattelart y Neveu, 2004, p. 147).

In his work *Research (1996): what is passed on from yesterday to the present day*, Schmucler (1997) explains that this great leap from politics to the market takes place in the following way: It begins by pointing out that the idea of market is “seductive” in so far as it represents an invitation to enjoy things and freedom without transgressing the rules. On the other hand, the fastidious act of denouncing, which translates often into correcting, proposing, formulating objections, does no longer mean to oppose it but “to look for ways of joining groups with dignity”. The market is the new stage where one can and must think about all, but in the terms of “*know-how*”. That is to say, leaving out the essentialist modality. Just taking into account the existence of a new man, interconnected within the context of a global village, the market’s ideal subject where his ultimate objective is a permanent transaction. On the other hand, the author states that consumption has become the adequate stage to form citizenship. For this –Schmucler says –two key moments were necessary. First, to accept that the human being was displaying all his possibilities in his own condition as citizen.. Secondly, (but not less severe in its considerations), to understand that consuming is the most legitimate way of existing. Paraphrasing Descartes, we might say something like: I consume, ergo I am. The presuppositions that derive from the formulated premises are, for the researcher, as follows: human existence, as such diluted into “undelayable mediations”, has ceased to ask itself about any sense of importance.

When thinking about some descriptions concerning modernity, Schmucler (1997) posits certain peculiarities expressed in the delay of the Latin American stage and defined its shape. That is how other societies reached modernity on the basis of the written word and its correlative in universal and compulsory education, whereas in Latin America this incorporation was created with a mixture of electronic images and illiteracy, incomplete and delayed schooling associated to a marked internationalization of the symbolic world belonging to the masses. By virtue of being

late, Latin American modernity was not built on the basis of a key tool for the decomposition of the power of writing. The scenario was rather more sombre even taking into account a protracted material poverty, an unstable and unfair educational structure at the different levels and, as way of compensation, a massive excess and “an egalitarian tendency on TV shows”. Modernity without development grows from mass culture and penetrates through TV communication. For this reason – Schmucler concludes – instead of opening a public space for citizens, as the written word did in these regions, we have a television that organized “the private space of consumers”.

In the face of the thesis that consuming transforms us into citizens, that the market is a stage for freedom where citizens can exercise their individuality, Schmucler (1997) considers that it becomes reasonable to vest “a certain autonomy” on the public in the face of the production conditions of the symbolic values that constitute it and that the receptor be considered as someone who is practicing a free sovereignty of sociocultural conditioning.

Though not denying the efforts to understand the concrete meaning assigned to the media discourse, after a series of studies that leave behind the different forms of determinism, the author states that frequently the very history of the construction of meaning gets blurred. . By way of example, two variables are confronted: the media vs the people, the groups and society, having previously achieved their autonomy and without taking into account the fact that studying their relationship demands placing the media within the framework of social training. Otherwise, its structural determinations are silenced, as well as the contradictions they are subject to or those which constitute one of its terms. Much of Latin American research in communication, the author points out, discovered that the consumer (or user) of the products of mass culture makes a re-appropriation of those objects offered by the producers. However, the problem – he thinks – does not lie in the number of circulating products but in the choice alternatives, in so far as all the offer takes on a “familiar scent”.

Concerning the action-knowledge oriented towards decomposing the consumer’s moves as, for example, probe his needs and desires, Mattelart y Mattelart (2005) show us that “The knowledge of these moves and desires will feed the circular path of programming-production-consumption, which is always unstable but oriented towards functional and caring integration of the consumer in this device (p. 108). This is what those enraged as a consequence of the collapse of a sociology of power and social reproduction – both authors state – do not know, and they do not hesitate to affirm that programmes are produced, distributed and defined by the cultural industry, although the texts are produced by the reader.

We must now consider the importance of another aspect that is present within the context of this analysis. In the nineties, García Canclini (1995) makes the proposal that the processes of consumption are more complex than a relationship between massive means of manipulating communication and docile audiences. Gándara (2006) considers that the aforementioned author would accept to go back to the eighties to understand what Martín Barbero was proposing in his work entitled *From the media to mediations* and even García Canclini himself in *Hybrid Cultures*. However, the well-known Argentine anthropologist, fails to mention that already in the sixties and the eighties some conceptions were being developed concerning the complexity of reception (in works by Mattelart, Muraro and Schmucler, among others). Despite the fact that in those days theoreticians were much more focused on production, and that the general tendency was to overestimate production, there have also been research works dealing with consumption and reception.

Let us now concentrate on another central operation within the conceptualizations formulated by García Canclini. In the words of Gándara (2006), the author eliminates the idea of conflict. That is, while in the eighties the chosen word was “hegemony”, in the nineties it was replaced by “market”. This change implies ceasing to combine the idea of reception clashing with that of production. As the notion of hegemony, even for those authors who point out the consensual aspect to the detriment of the coercive aspect, it always entails a conflict. And this conflict may be solved by means of an ideological agreement or by resorting to repression. But the market concept – Gándara points out – leaves aside any tensions.

The non-differentiation of consumption practices –Gándara warns (2006) – or balancing of consumption is another aspect that becomes questionable within the proposal we are analyzing. Now then, this non-differentiation entails the formulation of theories. Indeed, literary theories at some point in the past stressed the importance of the author and his biography. The key to the work interpretation was the questioning of the personal style determined by vicissitudes in the author’s life, to then move on towards the text and language above the subjective and psychological intentions, i.e., literary theories began to demand a return to the reading public. That is how in *Reader in fable*, Eco (1993) he points out that “the text is merely a presuppositional machine” (Eco, 1993, p. 39).

In a similar way, though in different periods and within the context of communication theories, Gándara (2006) holds that some authors, Martín Barbero and García Canclini amongst others, resort to these literary theories on reception and project them on a non-literary reception with the resulting risk: the reader that has developed the basic abilities to delve into the field of literature, to explore certain gaps or intertexts, was gradually formed by the school system or by other cultural

formation spaces. Thus, balancing different consumption practices, such as young men getting a tattoo or reading a text, constitute signs that must be decoded by someone. But the truth is that both decoding practices are not comparable in so far as their degree of complexity is substantially different. This became apparent in the historical debate between Landi and Sarlo. In an article entitled “Theory as scrap. Thesis by Oscar Landi on the subject of television”, Sarlo (1992) questions Landi’s thesis as he considers that it is a gross mistake to think that young people’s consumption practices around television and video-games can be put to use in other cultural spaces; and that the abilities and skills learned in these practices can be applied to other instances of consumption, such as reading a literary work or the meaning of a film. In an article entitled “The videoclip, a fin-de-siècle language”, Landi (1992) insists on the idea that the videoclip constitutes the language of the fin-de-siècle, in the following terms: “People write and paint as in videoclips: the first generations of audiovisual writers and painters, who spontaneously use grammars of the image and of literary fragments, are starting to appear [...]”. Concerning this point, Sarlo (1992) forewarns us about certain types of cultural consumption that demand specific abilities that are gradually acquired in the educational process. While on the other hand, “television appears as a medium that does not posit hard conditions even to the most spectacular spectators of its parnassus (Sarlo, 1992). The scope and abilities demanded by reading, such as to be able to distinguish what is central and what is secondary in a narrative, demonstrate a nature which is totally different to that of the videogames.

4. Globalising consumption: does it have a role in identity formation?

We consider it relevant to deal now, albeit briefly, with another key concept that, according to Gándara (2006), is at work in the mind of García Canclini and which leaves aside class conflicts: the globalisation of consumption. In the research of the period, one can observe the presence of a consumer community that has much more in common than those that are maintained by virtue of the nation, the social class, in brief, the typical variables that formed identities in bygone days. This implies that identities are formed in another way.

The thesis of consumption as a space where one’s identity is formed on the basis of the things one has or is capable of obtaining – García Canclini states (1995) - is based on a series of factors. Thus, the permanent transformations in production technology, in object design and in communication, turn identities unstable. That is, it is no longer possible to fix them on a list of symbolic goods belonging to an ethnic group or national community. The author states, in addition, that the symbolic value

of consuming “what is ours” was preceded in other periods by a principle of economic rationality. In other words, to consume foreign goods was a “a source of prestige and, sometimes, a quality choice” (pp. 14-19). On the other hand, he forewarns us that the category “identity” is conformed differently. In the face of a reality where we turn on a TV set made in another country and watch a diversity of films produced, shot, directed in different places by people from different countries, some interpretations have lost validity. Culture becomes a social process of “multinational assembly”, a combination of parts that any individual from any society, religion or ideology can use and, almost needless to say, resignify. According to García Canclini, what is produced everywhere can be in our culture and it is almost impossible to demarcate the ground of what is ours and what is alien. There is an interaction of economic and cultural activities that operates producing goods and services for consumption in diverse world centres. And what matters is the circulating speed of these goods to the detriment of the geographic sites from where individuals appropriate and create meaning through them (*Ibid.*).

The sense of what is one’s own in a panoply of cultural goods – García Canclini states (1995)– is delimited and resignified in “hybrid” social and historical processes. The hybrid link between autochthonous and foreign elements is verified in the consumption of goods by the popular classes, in handicraft made by peasants who combine their traditional know-how with the tourists, in the working class that, without losing their ancient and local beliefs, readapts the work culture to the use of the new technologies (pp. 49-50).

García Canclini (1995) thinks that there is an interaction between traditional products and those coming from transnational cultures, spread by the mass media. Both work together in the construction of a hybrid culture. This mixture created by receptors demonstrates a process of vesting meaning and of simple imposition by the hegemonic culture (pp. 15-16). Additionally, the author states that the wish to appropriate oneself of new things is not an irrational act nor alien to the culture that reaches the individual. Thus, he notes that the aborigines from Mexico, for example, consume modern foreign products as long as they can assimilate them to the community logic” (p. 48).

It must be noted that all considerations made up to now recognize the inflow of a transnational culture, but we can also perceive a hybridization phenomenon. And this mixture of diverse cultures can be interpreted as an expression of cultural strengthening of identities in the face of the alleged inculturation by globalising forces. Thus, Labourdette (1999) affirms that globalisation has become a myth that has concealed an operating force with opposite direction: the localizations. This is a phenomenon with global dimensions that reaffirms the existing diversity between

peoples, ethnic groups, races, nations, states, religions, etc. As shown by the evolution of history, while the reach of the globalising prophesy proves itself correct, in parallel, in simultaneity, in antagonistic and/or complementary form, the localization process takes the lead. It consists of group movements, most of them with a territorial basis, that push forward their organizations, its defence and the fight, pacific or violent, for their identity.

To a lesser degree, others appeal to negotiation and varied fighting mechanisms to conquer their autonomy, independence, and freedom in territories that are ancient annexations or dependencies. There also appear partitions and dismemberments which are the result of ancestral confrontations or, on the contrary, expressions of a tradition that is reasserting itself. All of these represent contradicting features of a naturalized globalisation. The aforesaid implies, according to the author, the existence of a double current: on the one hand, the global phenomenon, that advances seemingly triumphantly, and on the other hand, the localization, that takes shape on the dark side of a reality that recognizes a multitude of particularisms (pp. 113-114).

The so-called worldwide “*management*”, the “popular mass culture” implemented by the media and certain practices that extend beyond borders – Labourdette notes (1999)– represent a forceful sample of a globalising current. However, the author points out that culture makes reference to everything that is produced by human beings and to his ideas and beliefs, myths and behavioural patterns, which give shape to different societies (p. 126). That is, it constitutes peoples’ way of life in its richest variety. In a similar sense, the anthropologist Geertz (1996) holds that huge confrontations take place when trying to determine what these diverse ways of life are and if, strictly speaking, they exist at all. But he also draws our attention to the following aspect: reality is demonstrated by the deeds that are perceived. Therefore, we cannot be unaware that all peoples produce culture, i.e., they create sense (this should be read as: they consume ...) in different directions

In short, consumption constitutes a practice that, as well as others from the cultural field, shows the existence of a ceaseless fight between the globalising process with a homogenizing character, and particularisms, called localizations, which represent a concrete proof of the reaffirmation process of their identities.

Our objective is then to reflect, briefly, on the fact that people conform a social reality and which has been formed (objectively and subjectively at the same time), that translates into cultural practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1968). In Labourdette’s words (2003), “a set of routines, categorizations, myths, values, norms, behavioural patterns and institutions of diverse nature” (p. 122). The author points out that the permanence of said set is not only part of an inherited world view which has

been constructed by the same social actors, but it also becomes ineluctably part of their lives, and acquires sense in so far as it expresses itself, subjectively, in consequential practices (*Ibid.*).

The different representations of the different aspects of reality give shape to a part of the imaginary that does not originate naturally but, on the contrary which is a product of a socio-cultural artifice that has the peculiarity of being lived as belonging to the natural order. The internalization of certain behavioural patterns transforms this “world of life” into a reality which is lived without any questioning or problematicity. Let us be more precise: it becomes real natural. In fact, socialization processes allow us to internalize different “*habitus*”. And these habits create within us grounds or sedimentations that naturalize that which is part of what has been constructed (Labourdet, 2003, pp. 122-123). Thus, Bourdieu (1991) states that people inherit, as agents, rules that, in their condition as subjects, they can transform into practices, resignifying what they receive and at the same time, enriching it. Though, we must not lose sight of the fact that this possibility of behaving recognizes clear institutional limits. .

The truth is that human beings create and recreate meanings and values, and, in the same act, they not only form themselves, but also create diverse cultures. They consist in different practices of sense assignment which conform a kaleidoscope of diverse identities that is concealed, somewhat overshadowed, beneath an emerging global expansion.

To summarize what has been said up to now: realities are sociocultural and historical totalizations that are formed within different societies and that, at the same time, become worlds of life for its members, orienting their praxis and their daily and current interpretations. That is, their own – and differentiated - ways of life which bestow identity upon them.

At this point, we might as well ask ourselves: what are the limits for the individual for managing without this inherited structure? Or, in other words, to what point can he say he is going to consume what he likes? What we are dealing with is the permanent link between structure and subject. In this way, we might conclude that even if up to a certain point the individual can say that he consumes what he likes, in more precise terms, what he likes is a response to a present construction within himself at the time of constructing his wishes: the particular social fabric operating in the space and time in which the aforesaid subject has been socialized.

Before finalizing the present work, let us say that, we have not, at any point, had the intention of leaving aside a series of enriching contributions that have shed light on the understanding of consumer behaviour. From our perspective, we propose simply to rethink this concept stressing a particular aspect that we consider essential:

the social scheme. This is because each of the social actors that make up a society, are one and are many more, as they are hominized within a web made up of language, myths, legends, norms, customs, values, etc. This powerful - both structured and structuring - structure, is part of the complex process of consumption. As very well posited by Mattelart y Neveu (2004), between the break with the dogmas of the structuralist period and the features of “receptionitis”, it is necessary to continue exploring other aspects. And, under the sign of consumption, the powerful social scheme is a presence that must be considered. For this reason, and paraphrasing Borges: *We should not be amazed by Proteus of Egypt, because I, you, he, we, are one and many men.*

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